DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 163 411 CS 004 517

AUTHOR Thompson, Mark E.
TITLE Self-Image: An Important Concept for Study Skills Professionals.
PUB DATE Oct 78
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the North Central Reading Association (21st, Notre Dame, Indiana, October 20-21, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Developmental Programs; Elementary Secondary Education; Family Influence; *Personality Development; *Reading Ability; Remedial Instruction; *Self Concept; *Self Esteem; Self Evaluation

ABSTRACT

One of the most important assumptions of modern theories about self-image is that the maintenance and enhancement of the perceived self is the motive behind all behavior. Sense of self may be based on the views of others, it may be the result of interactions with others who provide meaning of self through their responses, it may come from considering intended conduct from the standpoint of those with whom one is situationally involved, or there may be several social selves (body self, cognitive self, and self-esteem) and the social "me" grows out of recognition received from others. It is clear that, whatever the source of self-image, early child rearing practices are important in its development. Research shows a significant relationship between self-image and academic achievement. Family background and concept of one's ability based on the image perceived to be held by significant others are important components of a self-image. Bright underachieving students often have poor self-images, while bright students with higher achievement levels have better self-images. Teachers in developmental classes need to help students develop positive self-images as they help them improve academic achievement. One will enhance the other. (TJ)

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Mark E. Thompson
620 Wichita Drive
Lexington, KY 40503

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Self-Image: An Important Concept for Study Skills Professionals

Presented To

The Twenty-First Annual Conference
of the North Central Reading Association
at the University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana

October 20 and 21, 1978

CS004517

Mark E. Thompson

Self-Image: An Important Concept for Study Skills Professionals

Abstract

The notion of self-image has been found to be an important concept concerning student development. This concept is particularly important during primary socialization. Study skills professionals need to be aware of the importance of self-image for their clients. Often underdeveloped students have formed a low opinion of themselves and their abilities. This is a serious handicap that needs attention along with cognitive skills development (reading comprehension, rate and flexibility).

This paper will examine the notion of self-image as a construct and explain its theoretical nature and background. An attempt is made to relate this theoretical construct to the research evidence and emphasize the significance for study skills professionals.

Self-Image: An Important Concept for Study Skills Professionals

Self-image is a concept that has been used by anthropologists, educators, psychologists and sociologists to help explain behavior. Combs and Snygg (1959) said that all behavior, without exception, is dependent upon the individual's personal frame of reference. The maintenance of self-concept is thought to be a central part of human personality (Sullivan, 1953). Lewin (1935) viewed self-image as a central and relatively permanent organization that gives consistency to the entire personality. Self can be defined as a complex and dynamic system of beliefs which an individual holds true about himself (Kinch, 1963 and Purkey, 1970). One of the single most important assumptions of the modern theories about self is that the maintenance and enhancement of the perceived self is the motive behind all behavior (Snygg and Combs, 1949; Rogers, 1951; Combs and Snygg, 1959 and Purkey, 1970). "The most important ideas which affect people's behavior are those ideas they have about themselves" (Combs, 1973, p. 212). When applied to a specific academic situation, a relevant aspect of self-concept is the person's perception of his own ability to learn accepted types of school behavior (Brookover, Paterson and Thomas, 1964).

There are numerous references to the importance of self-image throughout the literature of mankind. Eric Hoffer (1952), a most perceptive social critic and philosopher, said that "where self-confidence and self-esteem seem unattainable the emerging individual becomes a highly explosive entity" (p. 9). R. D. Laing, the controversial psychiatrist, stresses the sociocultural factors in our complex society that inhibit the natural development of self (Samuels, 1977). Laing said that "by the time a new human being is 15 or so, we are

left with a being like ourselves. a half-crazed creature, more or less adjusted to a mad world. This is normality" (Laing, 1967, p. 58).

DESCRIPTION

During the past few decades researchers have attempted to define the concept of self scientifically in order to separate it from its metaphysical base (Samuels, 1977). There are numerous terms used to help explain the concept of self-image. Some of these terms are: self-concept, self-esteem, self-love, self-ideal, self-estimate, self-conception, self-sufficient, self-confidence, self-insight, self-characteristics, self-evaluation, self-perception, self-picture, self-realization, self-respect, self-regard, self-feelings, self-acceptance, self-value, self-enhancement, ego-enhancement, ego-strength, ego-identify, ego-ideal and internal control. Freud gave attention to self with the concept of ego development and functioning (Purkey, 1970). Freudians and neo-Freudians generally hesitate to give the concept of self central importance in their theoretical formulations (Munroe, 1955 and Purkey, 1970). As a theoretical construct self-image may be quite difficult to identify and explain and even more difficult to translate into measurable empirical values. The term represents a notion about human behavior that has been observed repeatedly, but it is difficult to measure. Language can never be precise in the sense that it possesses complete objective meaning (Denton, 1970).

During the first 30 years of this century Cooley (1912) and Mead (1934) were writing about the theoretical nature of self. This interest by Cooley and Mead came at a time when the behavioristic psychologists gave scant attention to the concept of self (Purkey, 1970). The behaviorists had considerable influence between 1920 and the 1940's in this country. Cooley thought that sense of self arises partly from experience, and partly from imagining

other's conceptions of oneself. He stressed that a person tends to accept a particular view of self based on the views of those he admires. This idea developed into the theory of reference groups (Douglas, 1975). Self is seen as what Cooley called a looking-glass self--the result of interactions with others who provide meaning of self through their responses. Cooley's theory of self stressed early child development. "In Cooley's theory, how a mother perceives and treats her child would result in a favorable or unfavorable self-concept" (Samuels, 1977, p. 47).

Mead thought that self is created by a person's making a picture of himself through role taking--one considers intended conduct from the standpoint of those with whom one is situationally involved. Mead made the point that groups to which an individual belong serve as significant frames of reference. The concept of self was a major part of Mead's theoretical writing, and he argued that personality was determined by social-psychological factors (Douglas, 1973). William James has been given credit for initiating the social-psychological emphasis given to self-concept (James, 1893 and Samuels, 1977). His chapter on "The Consciousness of Self," was the longest in the two volumes, Principles of Psychology (1890). James theorized that there must be several social selves, and the so-called social me grows out of the recognition received from others (Samuels, 1977). The important dimensions of self-concept include: body self, cognitive self and self-esteem (which is the evaluative aspect of the self-concept). We put a value on our bodies, our academic ability and our selves in roles such as student, friend, son or daughter (Samuels, 1977).

Adler (1927), Horney (1937), Fromm (1939), Rogers (1951), Sullivan (1953), Combs and Snygg (1959), Allport (1961) and May (1969) have written on the importance of self-concept from various perspectives. Recently Rollo

May (1969) has explained the existentialist concern that individuals need to develop a sense of personal identity and to build meaningful links with the world (Samuels, 1977). May (1972) said:

> The confidence that one has worth is normally picked up first from attitudes of a mother or mother-surrogate toward the infant, and is then cultivated in the family by loyalty to the infant. As the child grows this initial feeling is reinforced by persons outside the family in their appreciation for him and his potentialities. Later, the mature human being seems to keep within his memories, to refer to in difficult times, the images of those people who have believed in him. When I was in college I found the experience of having some adult believing in me crucially important; and at times thereafter in my life when I was faced with fateful decisions, I found myself casting about to fasten upon one of these persons (p. 139).

The importance of early child rearing practices should not be overlooked when attempting to explain the development of self-image. The rapid and significant development of self-image in the early years of childhood is widely accepted. "It is generally acknowledged that stability of the concept of self begins early in life" (Samuels, 1977, p. 63). The family may be considered the psychic agency of society (Fromm, 1939). Other agencies in American society that help to socialize children are: the peer group, mass media and the educational system. "Each provides the child with a different set of abilities and contact with each may have a profound effect on how the child develops and locates himself within society" (Douglas, 1973, p. 193). The time-worn cliché "as the twig is bent, so grows the tree" has a special significance regarding a person's self-image (Mussen, 1963). This point needs to be understood by reading and study skills persons who are attempting to reverse fixed patterns of behavior. Some thought given to the difficult task of promoting self-image may be helpful. It may also help to understand why students come to view themselves as less than able. "A middle-aged, middle-class, white, female schoolteacher must work hard to understand the perceptual world of a black youngster from the ghetto" (Purkey, 1970, p. 10).

Major development of one's self-image occurs in the early years within the context of the family and particularly with the mother. Samuels (1977) said "specific child-rearing practices seem less important than parental attitudes toward themselves and their children" (p. 17). How a mother perceives and treats her child results in a favorable or unfavorable self-concept. A favorable self-concept helps one relate to the environment. It has been observed". . . that our attitudes toward others parallel our attitudes toward ourselves and that a basic love for ourselves is necessary if we are to love others. . ." (May, 1972, p. 138). "Hatred turned against oneself becomes inseparable from hatred directed against others" (Fromm, 1939, p. 515). Rogers (1951) found that people with high self-regard tend to be relatively accepting of others. It is quite probable that persons with a poor self-image are not able to help develop the self-image of those in their care. This observation should be meaningful for parents as well as teachers.

RESEARCH

Since 1960 there has been a considerable amount of work done to investigate the relationship between self-image and academic achievement.* "Over-all the research evidence clearly shows a persistent and significant relationship between the self-concept and academic achievement" (Purkey, 1970, p. 15). It is, however, difficult to measure self-image. Researchers are faced with the problem of definitional ambiguity. There are more than 200 self-concept measurement instruments available. A few of the better known self-report inventories of self-image include:

1) The Self-Esteem Inventory
2) The Bledso Self-Concept Scale

*Wylie (1961) has an excellent review of studies on self-concept prior to 1960, The Self-Concept: A Critical Survey of Pertinent Research Literature.

3) The Self-Appraisal Scale
4) The How-I-See-Myself-Scale
5) The Q-Sort Method
6) The Semantic Differential
7) The Tennessee Self-Concept Scale
8) The California Psychological Inventory
(Purkey, 1970)

There is considerable research available to indicate that a good self-image is important for academic achievement. Using the case study method, Conklin in 1940 reported differences between academically successful gifted children and academically unsuccessful gifted children; the range in IQ being from 130 to 163. It was found that the unsuccessful children had histories of less desirable relations with their families and with their companions; they also suffered more from cruel and ineffectual punishments, thus the child might easily see himself as unloved and unlovable (Walsh, 1956). In 1941 Lewis reported on the personalities, interests and home backgrounds of gifted children of superior and inferior academic achievement. In his study were 1,078 students of superior academic achievement and 756 students of inferior academic achievement from 36 states. Lewis (1941) found that, on the basis of teachers' judgements, the groups differed significantly on dependability, originality, self-reliance and investigativeness (Walsh, 1956). The difference was in favor of the superior academic achievement group. This superior group was credited with possessing more desirable personality traits, interests that are intellectual in nature, and superior home backgrounds. Brim (1954) found that students with high self-estimates of intelligence had higher grade-point averages than students of equal measured intelligence, but lower self-estimates of intelligence. Slocum (1956) found family background, especially parental interest in and aspirations for the student to be influential in withdrawal and persistence in college. Brookover at Michigan State University conducted some interesting research in the early 1960's on self-concept. He found that

self-concept of ability functions independent of measured intelligence in predicting school achievement, and a student's self-concept of ability is positively related to the image he perceives significant others such as parents, teachers and peers hold of him (Brookover, Paterson and Thomas, 1962). Brookover demonstrated that role expectations and self-concepts of ability are significant factors in influencing students' academic performance (Brookover, Le Pere, Hamachek, Thomas and Erickson, 1965). Among persons of equivalent measured intelligence, those with the higher self-estimate will usually outperform those with the lower estimate. The student who thinks he is not very intelligent may participate less in class discussions and may be inclined to give up sooner when working on difficult problems. "If this is the case, others may respond to him as if he were less bright than he is in fact, and this might result in a lower grade. This interpretation suggests the possibility of a relationship between the self-image and achievement motivation" (Lavin, 1965, p. 93). Research studies indicate that a positive self-image is associated with higher performance. There is some conflicting evidence, however, most students with a high level of academic achievement have better self-images than students with relatively low academic achievement levels. Students with learning difficulties tend to see themselves as less adequate than students who are making satisfactory progress (Walsh, 1956).

A favorable self-regard is also thought to be a necessary condition for positive mental health (Rogers, 1951). Students with academic deficiencies often display signs of poor mental health. Research indicates underachieving students to be insecure, dependent, immature and unable to form warm interpersonal relationships (Powell and Journard, 1963). Underachieving students are self-deprecatory, lack a clear system of goals and values, are vulnerable to disparagement by others, have immature relations with parents, lack insight

into their problems, have feelings of inadequacy and are likely to be anxious and depressed (Taylor, 1964; Kornrich, 1965 and Maxwell, 1971).

Reading has been found to be associated with a positive self-concept in many recent studies where race, sex and social class were controlled. Significant correlations between self-concept and reading achievement held with these variables controlled (Samuels, 1977). Poor reading ability is closely bound up with negative feelings of personal worth (Purkey, 1970). There is a positive relationship between self-concept and achievement, self-concept and peer relationships, self-concept and curiosity and a negative relationship between self-concept and anxiety. Students having problems in the academic environment will need remedial treatments with strategies designed to improve self-image. Many developmental skills programs have consciously and deliberately included counseling courses and support services to assist in the development of a positive self-image (Grant and Hoeber, 1978). Usually those students that progress in a study skills or remedial reading course also improve their self-image. Students can make accomplishments and be rewarded with the knowledge that improvement was made.

Working at a task and being successful helps to improve self-concept. It has been found that a greater self-esteem is a benefit from attending college (Katz, 1976). Having a profession or skill provides students with tools to make their way in the world. "Faith, enthusiasm, and passionate intensity in general are substitutes for the self-confidence born of experience and the possession of skill. Where there is the necessary skill to move mountains there is no need for the faith that moves mountains" (Hoffer, 1952, p. 4).

CONCLUSION

Teachers in developmental classes need to be sensitive to the fact that their students may have a negative self-image that can be an additional

handicap. Self-concept of ability is a functionally limiting factor in school achievement (Brookover, Paterson and Thomas, 1962). Teaching cognative skills may help students to improve upon their self-image, but this effort needs to be accomplished in a supportative atmosphere. Six factors have been identified as important in creating an atmosphere supportative of favorable self-images. These are: challenge, freedom, respect, warmth, control and success (Purkey, 1970). Psychological and intellectual growth are closely related, and teachers should understand that their efforts need to be supportive as well as structured (Katz, 1976). It has been found that there were significantly positive self-concepts in students whose teachers were calm, acceptant, supportive and facilitative. Teachers that are dominating, threatening, grim, and sarcastic produce negative self-feelings (Spaulding, 1954). Security is fostered by teachers who are secure themselves (Samuels, 1977). It has been said that teachers' attitudes toward themselves may be more important than their techniques, practices or materials (Combs, et al., 1969). This most interesting statement needs to be examined in some detail, and teachers at all levels should understand the merits of this observation. The implication is that people who have good self-images can promote positive self-images in others. This is a healthy process for our society. There is a need to look at truth from each person's perspective; reality lies in the person's present conscious experience of an event (May, 1969 and Samuels, 1977).

Those who are working with various types of ~~retarded~~ students need to be aware of the significance of self-image and the special problem it presents in an academic setting. For students who have come to see themselves as scholastic failures, the process of reversing this image is difficult. It requires considerable time with professional educators.

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